Denis Dyomkin
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(continuing my #fieldmemoirs as a one-man bureau, filing dispatches from memory about a world that no longer exists.)

Revisiting a vignette first published for a limited audience; was glad to read a longtime Reuters colleague's comment reminiscing about the “fascinating NYE” in the Moscow bureau, busy with writing flashes on Putin and checking no nukes were going off due to Y2K.
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On that New Year's Eve over 25 years ago, I wasn't celebrating the dawn of the new millennium with champagne, wine, vodka, or whatever it was that the Vladivostokians around me were drinking with their Olivye and Vinegret salads (or, less likely, bracing for doomsday due to the “millennium bug”). Instead, I was glued to the TV set, phone receiver in hand, watching the first chapter of a new political era unfold.

As Chinese fireworks lit up the festivities in the main port city on Russia's Pacific coast, I was busy as a Reuters stringer making sure I transmitted every word of Vladimir Putin's first speech as acting president to Reuters in Moscow - by holding my landline phone receiver very close to the TV's speaker!

In Moscow, almost the entire newsroom was, in turn, busy listening to my transmission on speakerphone while producing a flood of flashes that were making global headlines on CNN, the BBC News and elsewhere.

Hours earlier, the world had been shocked by the surprise resignation of Boris Yeltsin, the post-Soviet reformer whose pro-Western policies were rewarded by Russia's triumphant entry into the G7, thus making it the G8 for nearly two decades. Yeltsin's 1990s were a time of both great hope and chaos, but what ruined Yeltsin's democratic legacy was his ill-advised endorsement of the succession arrangement.

Russia’s Far Easterners were the first to hear what the new head of state, still shrouded in the “who is Mr. Putin” mystique, had to say - before Muscovites or Western capitals. Vladivostok is 7 time zones ahead of Moscow, so we had an advantage over The Associated Press and AFP to break the key parts of Putin's speech faster than any of our competitors.

The Internet was still in its embryonic dial-up stage, rendering the newswires’ dispatches even more critical in writing the first rough draft of history (and I turned out to be an immediate contributor to one of its most ominous chapters).

Putin’s speech sounded reassuring, aimed at calming a nation battered by economic collapse and instability, but with little appetite for a return to the USSR.

“Freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of the mass media, the right to private property - all these basic principles of a civilized society will be firmly protected by the state,” Putin declared. Now compare that with his track record.

The collage juxtaposes Yeltsin's teary-eyed farewell with Putin's calculated debut as a strong leader.

Personal reflections from a former Reuters Kremlin correspondent.
#Historical_Journalism

Views are my own and do not represent the Government of Canada.

Most relevant

Steve Gutterman · 1st 3d
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Thanks for this cool account, Denis. I wrote about this a year ago, contrasting that speech with his track record and where things stood 25 years later: https://www.rferl.org/a/years-of-putin-how-russia-changed-since-1999/33263792.html

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Steve Gutterman Thanks, Steve, appreciate this. And your timely analysis captures the very essence of that butterfly effect we live in, preordained or not. But certainly, "once they wore the crown, its situation remade them."

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